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## UP SANDWICH DOME

BY J. BROOKS ATKINSON

OPINIONS differ as to the virtues of comradeship on a walking tour. "Let me have a companion of my way," said Sterne, "were it but to remark how the shadows lengthen as the sun declines." "I like to go by myself," said Hazlitt. "I cannot see the wit of walking and talking at the same time." "Now to be properly enjoyed, a walking tour should be gone upon alone," Stevenson agreed. Robert Holliday somewhat clumsily pleads for a bosom-friend: "No one . . . should ever go on a journey with any other than him with whom one walks arm in arm, in the evening, the twilight, and, talking (let us suppose) of men's given names, agrees that if either should have a son he shall be named after the other." These fellows, be it noticed, talk of "walking tours" which cling to the high roads. What of those fellows with stout boots and heavy packs who follow trails in the woods and mountains? Do they go in company or by themselves? Obviously tastes again differ. But I am reminded that Frank Bolles tramped the woods of Chocorua alone, that John Muir clambered about the Yosemite Valley and at least once on Mount Shasta alone, that John Burroughs went alone about the Catskills, and that Enos A. Mills apparently goes everywhere alone. Doubtless this does not hold true for every pilgrimage, but those which yielded the best essays were invariably solitary walks. Indeed, if you plan to keep watch of the birds, as many do, you will do well to go by yourself, especially if your knowledge of birds, like mine, is not expert. For then you will want to drop your pack at an unfamiliar note and seek the soloist. If you are sensitive about boring your companions you cannot do this in a crowd.

Debating with myself whether to spend the night alone on Sandwich Dome or whether to seek comradeship, that is the conclusion to which such logic as I could summon brought me.

I knew that bird notes, colors, vistas, stars, sounds would all be infinitely more vivid if I went by myself. I knew, too (without dwelling on that subject over-long) that animals lived on Sandwich Dome, that a wildcat with huge paws was once caught in a trap near by, and that bears have been known to prowl through the woods. Pooh, pooh! Who cares? I determined to go alone.

At the breakfast table, where like directors we discuss plans and projects before the gossips catch them up outside, I assumed an indifferent pose while I recounted my plans. No hint of wildcats and bears colored my simple statement. To hear me talk of this epochal trip one would have supposed that I were merely going to the next farmhouse for the daily supply of milk. Indeed, when less adventuresome spirits of the household discreetly urged the dangers of such an enterprise, among them being wildcats and bears, I skilfully threw out the impression that such weak forebodings had not entered my head. Puffing out, preening like a male turkey, I laughed delicately in fine derision. Opposition persisted. My manly valor asserted itself. And like Manuel of Poictesme I determined to "follow after my own thinking and my own desire."

For six days rain and drizzle clung to the mountains. But at last the clouds rolled away and there came a wilting morning. The sun glared white on the barn roof, sending up myriads of wavy heat lines from the withering shingles. Mountains near and far were dimmed in haze; hardly a breath of air stirred the aspen trees. Familiar birds of farm and field matched the setting: from the baking hayfields the dry note of the chipping sparrow floated up; a scarlet tanager blazed in an apple tree. In spite of the oppressive heat I sharpened the camp axe, packed my knapsack, and set out soon after noon for the summit of Sandwich Dome.

I have known people who boasted openly of carrying a fifty-pound pack all day up steep trails, across brooks, and all without the slightest inconvenience. I admire them. My load of blankets, axe, fry-pan, provisions, sweater, map and birdbook did not weigh more than twenty-five pounds, but it was soon tugging away at my back. Perspiration drenched my shoulders where the straps crossed them, and my breath no longer came in smooth

rhythms. But the trail up the mountain led through woods which were still fresh and cool after the rainy weather. Once amid the yellow birches and again in a spruce thicket on this first pull up the mountain I dropped my pack with a clang of fry-pan and drinking cup, and sat down to take note of the birds. For had I not come especially to see them? Red-eyed vireos sang querulously and continually; veeries poured out occasional cool songs of reedy beauty. In the spruce thicket while I reclined against an up-rooted tree, golden-crowned kinglets came clambering through the branches overhead. Once a sudden crash of dead twigs brought me instantly from my pillow, and I saw a deer with white tail pointing skyward bound frantically down the mountainside. I was relieved to find the disturbance so harmless.

*En avant!* I challenged my protesting muscles with French idiom, hoping to stimulate them with strange language. I pulled on my pack and plodded up through birch, beech and maple groves to the zone where spruces became more and more frequent and no deciduous trees but the yellow birch were to be seen. Black-throated green warblers sang "Trees, trees, murmuring trees," and other birds chattered intermittently. In a tiny pool beneath an overturned spruce a Canadian warbler was splashing his yellow breast with its necklace of black spots. I rested my pack on a log, pulled out my pipe and waited to see whether he would return. He did not. But a Canadian nuthatch, calling "ank, ank" afar off, came nearer and was soon scratching up and down the trees near by. At length I found myself musing mournfully over an extra cut of hot apple pie which I might have eaten at luncheon, and to drive such gross thoughts from my head I started up the trail vigorously.

Two hours of steady climbing brought me near the top of the first ridge of Sandwich Dome. For a half hour I caught glimpses of the surrounding country before the trees opened for a complete view to the east. A hot shadeless spot; huge blowdowns had completely obliterated the trail. I was drenched with perspiration, and swarms of blackflies spun dizzily around me. Once more I dropped my pack, and lighted my pipe in self-defense. In the east rose the strong form of Whiteface with Flat Mountain Pond, an eye in the forest, placid near its base. A brisk east

wind chased from time to time across the surface of the water and set the spruce branches whispering in the forest about me. A considerable stretch of good woods, soon to be cut into boards; I thought of the many days I had spent tramping through all parts of it on various, idle quests, and wondered what charms might remain after the lumbermen have completed their work.

Just over the shoulder of Sandwich Dome and well up towards the summit I proceed cautiously. For the single uncommon bird of my limited acquaintance lives there. Not that his coloring is striking nor that his song is intrinsically stirring. Indeed, this fellow of white underparts, spotted throat and breast and plain olive-brown back lays no claim to physical or vocal beauty. Two or three summers passed after I had first seen him before I was certain of his identity. For the Bicknell's thrush, as he is called, resembles in many respects the olive-backed thrush which lives in similar surroundings. I know insouciant bird-hunters who prattle glibly of Cape May warblers, mourning warblers and Bohemian waxwings. I am no fit associate for them; my store of bird lore is pitifully small for such company. But the Bicknell's thrush in a spruce thicket gives me as much pleasure as a dingy, yellow-paged volume gives the book collector. And as I approached the summit this day at last I heard one of them singing; after stalking for fifteen minutes I caught a glimpse of him in the thicket.

By five o'clock I threw down my pack for the last time near the summit. By six o'clock I had finished supper and cut enough wood to last the night through. Then I pulled on my sweater, replenished my pipe again and went to the summit. The view was interesting without being inspiring. To the east stretched the Sandwich range—Chocorua, Passaconaway, Whiteface and Tripyramid. Paugus was nearly lost behind the northern ridge of Whiteface. Osceola and Tecumseh rolled up near enough to be clearly seen, their forests torn by lumbering. The burly form of Carrigan was in line with the faint suggestion of Mount Washington. A sharp, rocky point, barely visible through the summer haze, was Lafayette; and other summits, some white with granite, some black with spruce, rolled as far to the north as I could see.

A singularly homely range of mountains, modest in height, graceful in outline, accessible—mountains where a man may tramp and live. I wonder at the stupendous beauty of the Alps—the sharp, icy Matterhorn, its glistening white neighbors, Breithorn, Lysskamm and round to Monte Rosa, the vast distances of white-capped, jagged peaks, snaky glaciers in every crevice, deep gorges, turbulent streams, inns where bread, cheese and a bottle of wine may be taken at ease on comfortable porches—all waiting for a properly attired tourist at the price of a leisurely walk along broad paths. In Switzerland there's never a peak nor a glacier too mean to be some happy landlord's palace. But for solid enjoyment give me the simple White Mountains with their network of dim trails, their rough shacks and uncleared forests. Parts of them are still wild and unsubdued. Parts of them are still more refreshing than the Alps to dwellers in the hurly-burly of sophisticated society.

The sun went down quickly in a mass of rosy clouds and the sunset glow faded from the peaks. I went down to sit beside my campfire while the spruce trees moaned and groaned in voices disarmingly human. I was alive to every noise. The thin-voiced blackpoll warblers that zee-ed all the evening and the white-throated sparrows that kept singing "Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody" were as familiar books in a strange library. Think of the million songs which fill the air every summer evening in such places—all unheard by human ears. At twilight a white-throat flew into a dead spruce branch on one side of the clearing. I could see his tiny form against the sky and watch him tip back his little head each time he sang. Time passed with incredible slowness. Just as I was becoming accustomed to the sounds of the woods and my heart no longer skipped a beat at the sawing of the trees, something burst into the clearing with amazing speed. Wildcat or bear? Every nerve in my body was a-tingle. The intruder turned out to be nothing more dangerous than a brown rabbit. I composed myself quickly and remained quite still. He edged nearer in the firelight, sniffing inquiringly and wiggling his long ears, until he stopped scarcely two feet from my outstretched hand. For fifteen or twenty minutes he sat gazing spell-bound into the fire, and then bounded off into the thickets.

After piling more wood on the fire I proceeded to roll up in my blankets in the log shelter. I pulled the blankets over my head for added warmth (as I told myself), closed my eyes and waited. The sound of the wind in the trees was uncanny. I thought of the many miles of darkness which lay between my home and the summit of Sandwich Dome. Still I waited. Eight hours before daylight—what an interminable period! Sleep failed to come. I thought enviously of the many people who were securely asleep on feather beds in the valley.

A rustling in the bushes. Something moved cautiously. I felt the blood pounding in my veins. Clang! My fry-pan had been upset on the rock where I had left it. This insult required challenging. An eye for an eye! I flung the blankets from my face and saw two porcupines nosing in the informal kitchen in front of the shelter, and gnawing the axe handle where my hands had sweated on it. I shouted at them and threatened destruction with a stick. They waddled off unconcerned. Perhaps ten minutes elapsed before they were back again. This time I prodded them with a stick but they returned within a few minutes. Grunting and nosing about as they did the local term of "hedgehog" seemed particularly appropriate. Occasionally they shook themselves and the rustle of their quills sounded like the rustle of dry leaves. It was amusing to poke them with the stick, see their quills rise and hear their peevish squeal.

I was wide awake again. The moon filled the clearing with dim light. I flung off my blankets, shivering in the chill of the night, and stepped out to replenish the fire. The damp east wind was quickly condensed on the cold mountain summit and trailed clouds over the peak. Warmly wrapped in my blankets again I finally dozed off to sleep.

Shortly after three o'clock I awoke from a refreshing nap to a dismal, damp clearing in the faint gray of early morning. At half past three the ubiquitous chipping sparrows trilled lamely, but in spite of their languid efforts the moist world seemed peculiarly uninviting. A long hour passed before the white-throated sparrow first cleared his throat. No wonder that the other birds were inspired to sing, and that blackpoll warblers and thrushes joined the morning chorus!

Night was now definitely over; the business of day had begun when the first white-throat's voice charmed the forest. I packed my knapsack, and as I started down the mountain, rain began to fall thick and fast. The new trail which I now followed led through virgin spruces that hid their tops in the fog. Rain drops fell softly from their branches to the mossy ground; but down among the hardwoods the roar of the storm was strong. A hermit thrush sang "pompadeedela" as I hurried past, and a black-throated green, too, had rubbed the sleep and the rain from his eyes. The wet beech and birch vistas ahead were as delicately green as new spring foliage. An hour of scrambling down the trail, brushing against the leaves, drenched my clothing with rain water, and I splashed through the deepest brooklets without feeling appreciably more wet. Near the base of the mountain I left the trail to walk home directly through the woods, and as I crossed the last wet pasture to come up the drive a robin was singing in the maple near the barn. Just as the white-throated sparrow was the symbol of the woods so was the robin the symbol of home. Indoors the warmth and cheer of a birch fire, while the noisy rain pattered on the roof and windows and filled the gurgling rain barrels to overflowing, was a cheerful culmination to my early morning walk down the mountain. The rest of my family, who were still in bed, shouted a torrent of questions down the stairs. Was I afraid? they asked with one accord. Perish the thought! Afraid in a New Hampshire forest!

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